DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 124 896 CS 002 740

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TITLE The English Teacher as Teacher of Study Skills.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Secondary School English Conference (Boston, April 2-4, 1976); Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Needs; English Curriculum; *English Instruction; *Information Sources; *Information Utilization; Resource Staff Role; Resource Teachers; Secondary Education; Study Habits; *Study Skills; *Test Wiseness

ABSTRACT

Success in secondary school depends largely upon students' competency in study skills. The English teacher emerges as the plausible agent for the development of the following skills: following directions, locating information, evaluating and selecting information, assembling and organizing data, retaining and recalling information, varying rates of reading, and taking tests. Study skills instruction can either be incorporated into the English class's reading and writing curriculum, or it can be treated as a special part of the curriculum. The informed English teacher can serve as resource person in study skills to teachers of other subjects, as well as provide direct instruction to students. (KS)

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The English Teacher as Teacher of Study Skills

Success in secondary school depends, to a large measure, upon the student's ability to cope with his/her textbook reading assignments in the various subjects taken each term. Another significant factor is the student's ability to handle research assignments and tests. These, in turn, depend upon the student's competencies in study skills.

What are the Study Skills? These are the skills entailed in the effective and efficient uses of reading for study purposes in the content areas. Generally included are the following: (1) following directions, (2) locating information, (3) evaluating and selecting information, (4) assembling and organizing information, (5) retaining and recalling information, (6) varying rate of reading, and (7) taking tests. Furthermore, each of these general areas consists of a complex of several specific subskills, as delineated below.

Following Directions: Following a simple one- or two-line direction is easy, provided one can read and understand the sentence (s). The task becomes more complicated as the directions become lengthier and more complex. An appropriate sequence for following such directions is as follows: (1) Do not start to do anything until you have read all of the directions first. Get an overview of what is to be done; (2) Re-read carefully to note the specific steps to be taken. As you come to each step, keep it in mind as you review the previous steps; (3) try to understand the whole process that is being described for you to follow. Try to form a mental picture of the final product or outcome; (4) Number the steps if they have not been numbered; (5) Circle or underline the key words in

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CS 002 740

each step. Be sure you understand all key terms; (6) Refer to any illustrative materials that accompany the directions and relate them to the verbal directions; (7) Carry out the steps in the designated sequence; (8) Upon completion of the task, check back over all the directions to determine if they have been accurately and completely followed.

Locating Information: This skill includes using the various parts of books to obtain information, using various kinds of reference materials, and using the library. Each of these encompasses subsidiary knowledge.

Among the information-bearing parts of textbooks that students need to know about are the dust jacket, spine, title page, copyright page, preface, foreword, lists of tables or other illustrative materials, sectional headings, chapter headings, paragraph headings, marginal headings, introductory material to sections or chapters, chapter summaries, footnotes, end-of-chapter references, appendices, and bibliographies. In addition, students need to know how to use the table of contents, the index, and the glossary, as well as the graphic aids (charts, tables, graphs, diagrams, maps, pictures, photographs) that are in books.

Among the reference materials that students should know about are almanacs, atlases, dictionaries, directories, encyclopedias, the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, and the thesaurus. Locating information in the library involves knowing about the different sections of a library, knowing how to use the card catalog, and knowing how to use the Dewey Decimal System.

Skill in locating information requires more than just the mechanicaal aspects involved in using the various information sources mentioned above. It also requires proficiency in phrasing and rephrasing questions to direct one's search, proficiency in interpreting assigned research questions and topics, and proficiency in selecting key words and alternate key words to aid in the information search.

Evaluating and Selecting Information: Although for discussion purposes, evaluation and selection of information is treated separately here, these processes operate simultaneously with location of information. As the individual searches for and through different sources in order to locate the kinds of information needed, he/she evaluates the information located in light of his/her purposes and selects (or rejects) that information accordingly. Since the evaluation and selection of materials and information relate to the reader's purpose, the ability to clearly determine that purpose and to select only those items that are important to that purpose is basic to the effectiveness of the reader's information-gathering.

Evaluating and selecting information also entails the ability to judge whether the material located is appropriate, relevant, sufficient in quantity, specific enough, recent enough, or sufficiently time-inclusive. It also requires the ability to determine the reliability of the information source, the authoritativeness of the writer or editor, and the authenticity of the findings. In addition, in regard to certain materials, evaluation and selection of information may entail the ability to differentiate fact from opinion, to distinguish between and among different opinions, and to detect propaganda techniques.

Assembling and Organizing Information: In order to render usable the information located, evaluated, and selected, that information must be assembled and organized in some effective manner. The mode of assemblage could be note-taking, outlining, summarizing, charting, diagramming, or combinations of these. Although, technically, these fall within the expressive area of communication skills, they depend upon the adequate reading of the material in the first place. No matter what the particular mode of data collation used, there are certain underlying commonalities of reading comprehension involved.

The skills of reading comprehension that are necessary for assembing and organizing information include identifying main ideas, identifying subordinate ideas, identifying details supporting or expanding the main and subordinate ideas, recognizing paragraph organization, and identifying an author's or editor's organizational devices. Categorizing of information, which is a reading-dependent skill, also is involved, while noting key words and phrases is a factor in all of the preceding. Students need to develop these subsidiary skills in order to be able to effectively assemble and organize information. They then need to use these skills to take notes, to write summaries, to develop outlines, and to cast charts, tables, or diagrams. The particular and unique aspects of each of these needs to be developed as components of the study skill of assembling and organizing information.

Retaining and Recalling Information: Secondary school students need to retain and recall a great deal of information that they read in order to be successful in written test-taking and oral reporting. Fortunately, there are techniques that they can be taught to aid them in their efforts. Among these techniques are underlining and annotating as one reads to highlight main ideas, related details, and summary statements; immediate, intermittent, or delayed self-recitation either in written,vocal, or subvocal format wherein one reviews to oneself the information previously read; evoking sensory imagery for association with the material read; using mnemonic devices such as codes, acronyms, special words, sentences, or rhymes. Study formulas such as SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review) are also useful means for helping students retain and recall information.

Varying Rate of Reading: Most secondary school students tend to read all materials at the same rate. They need to learn about varying their

reading rate in accordance with certain factors. The factors to be considered are the reader's purpose in reading the particular material, the nature of the material itself (its content, format, typography, readability level), the familiarity of the reader with the type of content the material deals with, the inherent interest the material holds for the reader, and the time for reading at the reader's disposal at the particular moment. Students need to practice varying their rate under timed conditions supervised by the teacher. They also need to learn when re-reading of material is advisable, and when re-reading is counterproductive.

Taking Tests: The taking of tests is a fact of life for all secondary students. However, knowledge of the techniques of reading test directions and questions are not so widespread among students. Most fundamental is the accurate and complete following directions after a careful reading and re-reading of them before beginning to answer any questions, as well as a re-reading of them after completing the test to ascertain that the directions have been fully complied with.

Since questions can be asked in a variety of formats, students should learn how to cope with each kind. They need to learn to recognize and respond appropriately to multiple-choice, matching, true-false, fill-in, completion, and open-ended questions on short answer tests , and to deal with essay questions. They need to learn how to distinguish between essay questions that require an interpretive or evaluative response from those that require a literal response, how to search for clues to the answers in the wording of the questions themselves, and how to jot down a brief outline or key phrases in sequence before writing the actual response. They also need to understand the meanings of critical terms used in the directions and questions of essay tests, as for example, "describe," "explain," "compare," "enumerate," "trace," "name," "develop," "substantiate," and the like.

Students also should be instructed in such non-reading elements in test-taking as appropriate apportioning of time, coding of questions as to relative difficulty for the testee, and sequencing of questions to be answered.

Role of the English Teacher: Who should teach the study skills delineated above? Ideally, each subject area teacher should teach those components that are relevant to their particular areas. Realistically, this does not happen very often. When such instruction is given, it tends to be only occasional, unsystematic, and quite superficial. Moreover, just like reading and writing, study skills are generic; they are inherent in all subjects (although in particular subjects, certain study skills may be more pertinent than in others). The English teacher emerges as the plausible agent for the development of students' study skills since it is the English teacher who is responsible for developing students' reading and writing skills. If the English teacher does not undertake this responsibility, no one else will!

Study skills instruction can either be incorporated into the English class's reading and writing curriculum, or it can be treated as a special part of the curriculum. The knowledgeable English teacher can also serve as a resource person in study skills to teachers of other subjects, to assist them in developing the students' study skills necessary to success in their particular subjects. Can all of this be done? Yes! Should it be done? Yes! Without planned, systematic study skills instruction, students will continue to flounder when reading and writing for study and research purposes. The English teacher must take direct instructional action to ensure that students develop proficiency in all of the study skills necessary to their academic success.